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SUBJECT: TRIBAL DEATHS HIGHLIGHT GOVERNMENT LAND TRANSFER PROGRAM IN
FARC AREA OF BORDER

REF: 09 CARACAS 1503

CLASSIFIED BY: Robin D. Meyer, Political Counselor, DOS, POL; REASON:
1.4(B), (D)

11. (C) Summary: The October 13 killing of three members of the Yukpa tribe in the border state of Zulia highlighted the tension surrounding the Venezuelan government's (GBRV's) land transfer program. The killings, supposedly by other Yukpa members, followed the alleged theft of 124 cattle two days earlier from a privately owned farm near the border area with Colombia. Both cattle farmers and indigenous rights organizations have publicly blamed the GBRV for the violence, which took place in the context of a major government land transfer program that is giving private dairy farms to the Yukpa. Minister of Interior Tariq El Aissimi and Minister of Public Works and Housing Diosdado Cabello have made frequent trips to the region, where the FARC reportedly is present. End Summary.

Background

12. (U) The Sierra de Perija in Zulia State where the killings occurred constitutes part of Venezuela's western border with Colombia. The region is one of Venezuela's premier dairy-farming areas, with the municipality of Machiques alone producing 520,000 liters of milk per day, about 13% of Venezuela's total output. About 120,000 people live in Machiques municipality, which covers an area of 10,360 km², much of which can only be accessed by foot. There are 12,000 indigenous Yukpa and Bari people in the municipality. While some indigenous people do work on farms, the majority of the large cattle and dairy farmers are not from the indigenous community.

Theft of Cattle and Yukpa Deaths

13. (SBU) On October 11, 124 cattle were stolen from the privately owned Hato Alto Viento farm in the Machiques municipality. President of the local Cattle Farmers of Venezuela (Fedenaga)

chapter Armando Chacin, publicly called on the government to investigate the theft, or "we will do it ourselves." Minister of Interior Tareck El Aissami responded by accusing Chacin of being a "violent paramilitary rightist." Nonetheless, the GBRV established an investigative commission made up of the local Scientific and Penal Investigative Corps (CICPC, similar to the FBI in the U.S.) and members of the National Guard. Two days following the theft, on October 13, violence broke out between two communities of the Yukpa tribe, the Wamapamocha and Chaktapa, resulting in the deaths of Evert Garcia, Mireya Romero and Herper Romero and injuries to five others. Sabino Romero, a leader of the Chaktapa community, was detained for the crime in a military hospital shortly following the killings.

14. (C) The explanations for the violence between the two Yukpa communities vary. Former Mayor of Machiques Alfonso Marquez told Poloff November 3 that the dispute centered on how to divide up the stolen cattle. National Fedenaga President Manuel Heredia told Emboffs October 20 that the killings resulted from the decision of some Yukpa members to cooperate with the GBRV commission investigating the cattle theft. Sabino Romero's son publicly accused a cattle farmer of paying the leader of the Wamapamocha community 15,000 Bolivares Fuertes (about \$7000 U.S. at the official exchange rate) to kill Simon Romero, thereby initiating the violence that resulted in the deaths. Fedenaga spokespersons denied any connection to the killings, characterizing it as a "fight between the Yukpa over land."

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Within the Context of a Major Land Transfer Program

15. (C) The theft and the violence occurred within the context of a major government land transfer program, initiated in October 2008 with the establishment of the National Commission for Demarcation of Indigenous Land. Fedenaga leaders told Emboffs that the Commission announced the four coordinates demarcating the land to be given to the Yukpa without consultation with the major dairy farmers of Machiques. The identified area included the Sierra de Perija along the Colombian border, and a significant part of the Machiques municipality, along with its water supply. It covered 600 farms, which collectively represent 40% of the area's milk production and employ 14,000 workers. Former Machiques Mayor Marquez told Poloff that most farmers discovered their land would be expropriated via a televised announcement. "There is no clear legal process for transferring this land," he said, "and if the government wants it they should pay for it." Once an announcement has been made that a certain area belongs to the indigenous people, he said, "the Yukpa invade, eat the cattle, and sell the machinery."

16. (C) The confusion and violence surrounding the land transfers have also resulted in criticism from groups supporting indigenous rights. Following the October 13 killings, representatives of 17 human rights organizations signed a letter denouncing the GBRV's activities in the region, recommending a restructuring of the National Demarcation Commission, an audit of Plan Yukpa, and a management review of the Ministry of Indigenous People. Hernan Gonzalez (protect throughout) of the Indigenous University of Venezuela told Poloff October 27 that while "there has never been this kind of attention on the indigenous people before this government," presumed good intentions result in "paternalistic and assistance-driven" policies with negative consequences. He said the land transfer in Machiques was not well-planned, did not prepare the Yukpa to take over the work of the farms, and ignored significant economic concerns. In other parts of the country, he noted, lands turned over to indigenous groups have become havens for criminals and drug traffickers. "The indigenous tribes are not able to keep them out," he asserted.

The FARC, Colombia and Coal Deposits

¶17. (C) Some observers believe the GBRV has ulterior motives for its decision to transfer land from the dairy farmers in Machiques to the Yukpa. They point to the high level of interest from senior GBRV officials, such as Minister of Interior Tariq El Aissami and Minister for Public Works and Housing Diosdado Cabello, who have made frequent visits to the area. El Aissami has asserted that "this government is always on the side of the indigenous peoples, " and has used the conflict surrounding the Yukpa deaths as justification for sending more National Guard troops to the area. Fedenaga leaders told Emboffs that the FARC is present on the Venezuelan side of the border, and the Director of the NGO "Citizen Control," Rocio San Miguel (protect), told Poloff October 22 that the GBRV has a long-standing agreement not to disturb FARC guerrilla activity in the area.

¶18. (C) Former Machiques Mayor Marquez agreed with San Miguel's claim, adding that President Chavez's concern about the Defense Cooperation Agreement with Colombia was that the U.S. would discover what was happening in the Sierra de Perija. Marquez also pointed to the GBRV's unexplained interest in one particular infrastructure project - the construction of a road through the

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region with exceptionally thick asphalt. "What are they planning to do with such a road?" he asked. Marquez said there was a GBRV agreement with an international consortium to exploit known coal deposits. He argued that the GBRV had been framing the issue as a battle over Yukpa land rights simply as a ruse to clear the area of landowners.

Comment

¶19. (C) The heavy involvement of senior GBRV officials El Aissami and Cabello, as well as the lack of institutional planning and support for the new Yukpa land owners, suggests that the GBRV's interest in the Sierra de Perija is less related to their purported commitment to indigenous rights and more to extending national government control over a sensitive and potentially lucrative border region. The tension between the dairy farmers and the indigenous communities is an example of how the GBRV is sharpening differences between Venezuelan groups.
DUDDY